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The Rise And Fall Of The Afterlife

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PREFACE

This book is a revised, documented and expanded version, with the addition of three appendixes, of the six Read-Tuckwell Lectures that I had the honour of delivering at the University of Bristol in the early summer of 1995. The Read-Tuckwell lectureship was established in the 1930s as a residual bequest to the University by Alice Read-Tuckwell for the purpose of lectures on Human Immortality and related matters. Given this subject, it seemed to me a challenge to analyse the most important developments in Western ideas concerning the soul and the afterlife from the point of view of a classicist and historian of religion. I therefore selected as my topics: the rise of the immortal soul; the resurrection; the birth of the Christian afterlife until the idea of Purgatory had established itself; spiritualism, and the near-death experience. In the last two chapters, though, I do not focus solely on modern developments but compare them with similar phenomena in antiquity and, in the case of the near-death experience, also with those in the Middle Ages.

While in Bristol, my wife and I greatly enjoyed the hospitality of the University, and I feel a deep sense of gratitude to the Department of Classics and Ancient History for their invitation. The lectures were interspersed with seminars on related topics, which broadened my views, as did the discussions following the lectures. For chairing the various sessions I would like to thank in particular Ronald Hutton, Fernando Cervantes and Kieran Flanagan. Our Bristolian friends Jeanne and Peter Crosse were a delight as always. Finally, I owe a particular thanks to Richard Buxton for his impeccable organisation of the lectures. I will always remember them as one of the highlights in a friendship that has lasted now for nearly a quarter of a century.

Several of the lectures have since been delivered at other places, and two of the chapters have already been published, albeit in a preliminary, shorter version, as have the three appendixes. I thank my hosts for their hospitality and the publishers for their permission to reprint these contributions. Naturally, in the course of investigating so many different subjects I have felt myself regularly out of my depth. If I have not stumbled too much, this is wholly to be attributed to the information and criticisms of many friends and colleagues, who also kindly revised my English. I give details about places of delivery,

previous publications and intellectual debts at the end of each chapter and appendix, but I would like to mention here in particular Ken Dowden, Bob Fowler, Fritz Graf, Ton Hilhorst and Peter van Minnen.

For the past four years I have served as Dean of the Faculty of Theology and Science of Religion at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. This position meant that I often had to work on this book in stolen moments. I certainly would not have been able to finish it in the foreseeable future, had I not been at the Institute for Advanced Study in the autumn of 2000: if there is a heaven on earth, it must be in Princeton. I thank the Institute for electing me to a Membership and my own Faculty for supporting my stay.

I dedicate this book to the memory of my father, a Calvinist minister and church historian. He instilled a love of history into his children and was a staunch believer in the 'life everlasting'. Last but not least, I thank my wife Christine for putting up with so much afterlife in this life.

Jan N. Bremmer
Groningen and Princeton, Christmas 2000